

Days of the Future Past

by superninja

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Summary: Captain America story. Cap tries to locate his ex-girlfriend with unexpected results

Days of the Future Past

Hello all. Captain America, Rachel Leighton, the Mandarin, Avengers and Hank Pym, etc. all belong to Marvel Comics and not me.

A little background for those of you not avid Captain American fans. My favorite run of the Captain America comic book involved his relationship with a reformed criminal, Rachel Leighton (aka Diamondback). A member of the Serpent Society, she fell for the Last Boy Scout, and changed her evil ways. What drew me to their relationship was that Cap was such a goody two shoes, yet he was involved with a woman with this sordid past. The removal of the Super Soldier Serum from Cap's body via blood transfusion and Rachel's infusion of Cap's blood by his nemesis the Red Skull gave her the potential to possess all of his physical abilities, but it was really never used in the storyline to any effect. Rachel disappeared from Cap's life after that run, and to my knowledge, has not reappeared since. This story tries to explain that.

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I wake up with a headache. My eyes are open, but I see nothing but darkness, and my faded memory slowly returns. I begin piecing together events from the last 24 hours, well, maybe longer, who knows how long I've been here...I try to stand and hear the clinking of chains, then feel resistance on my wrists and ankles. I've been out for several hours, now, judging by the numbness in my extremities. It usually takes more than a blow to the head to take me out, but then again, I thought I knew my opponent. Maybe I did. Maybe there was more than one, I tell myself. Or maybe I misjudged his capabilities. The chains are bolted to the floor, probably titanium, judging by the density. Floor feels pretty solid, too. Looks like someone was prepared for me. Wish I had some light, maybe some

matches...no...seems they've snagged my utility belt as well. Nothing to do but sit and wait it out.

How did I get myself into this mess? I received a distress call, what I'm guessing, was roughly 36 hours ago. An anonymous caller claimed to have been done wrong by my old friend Batroc the Leaper. Seems he'd teamed up with one of his cronies, Machete, and had been running some heavy weapons through a small dealer in Madripoor. Admittedly, it sounded like setup, but when the hunted can become the hunter, well, why not? Mr. Anonymous claimed he had been swindled out of his share, and wanting revenge, was willing to provide me with information if I showed up at a neutral location in 6 hours. Speeding along in an Avengers Quinjet, I arrived in Madripoor and headed down to the local bar, and sat in a booth watching all sorts pile in and pile it on. If you've ever been to Madripoor, you'd agree it's a city of extremes. You're either extremely poor, or extremely wealthy. Not much middle ground. If you ARE in the middle, chances are you're dirty and working for one of the wealthy merchants or brokers, which translated here means "criminal". I had plenty of eyes looking me over, but no one would bother. I'd been here before, and my reputation preceded me.

My attention was diverted by a small man entering dressed in servant's clothes. He was obviously out of place; his neatly pressed clothing and well-groomed hands said he was on the wrong side of town. I acknowledged him, and he approached me warily, introducing himself as "Chang". He said he would escort me to his master, and I stood up and followed him out onto the dirty streets. Apparently my fedora and trench coat did little to hide my notoriety, as heads turned while I followed Chang down the narrow avenue. It had become clear after a few minutes that he was trying to distract me, moving too fast for me to follow comfortably, reappearing now and then at a distance, ushering me on into the crowd. I drifted off for a moment to the sounds of an old tune I remembered from my war days playing on the breeze. As I watched Chang's head bob up and down in the throng, I wondered if he knew I saw the two thugs coming up behind me. The crowd soon parted, as though part of some joke I wasn't in on, and the goons advanced. I could see they were a couple of beefy locals who looked like they'd been around the block one too many times. These guys weren't capable of taking me out, so that meant to keep my eyes open. The crowd let out scattered gasps when I drew out my shield, and the thugs looked scared, but kept coming nonetheless. Someone must have offered them a lot of cash to do this little dance, I smiled to myself. It took a thought to knock them both to the ground in unconscious heaps. The crowd backed away as my shield returned to my open hand. Sometimes I just couldn't resist. "Does anyone else want to play catch?" Chang showed up again, standing over his thugs, looking much more menacing now. I was on guard, because, I couldn't imagine for the life of me why he would go to all that trouble to confront me out in the open; I'd expected an ambush. "Let's cut to the chase, Chang," I said pointedly, "Who's your boss, and what does he want with me?!"

"My master offers you a gift," he said, then stepped towards me. In a flash he held out an open palm that revealed a small pellet the size of a marble. I quickly looked it over, trying to gauge its contents. If it was chemical, who knows what it could do to the crowd! Chang's eyes narrowed as he crushed the pellet in his hands, "early retirement," he said as he blew the contents on me.

I could still see Chang in front of me, despite the fact that the powder contained a form of fast-acting narcotic, and my focus became unsteady. I heard the laughter of the crowd as Chang grinned madly before me. Footsteps behind me made me turn, around only to confront Chang, again? This time he was armed with a blade. This had to be the work of the drug. The crowd was moving in waves, and I raised my shield in time to hear the crack of my skull as the world went black.

And that's the long and short of it. My head's still a little sore where I got whacked, and I rub it as a reminder. Rattling my chains in frustration, I wait for my captors to reveal themselves. My only explanation for Chang's success is that there are two of him: twins or cutups or maybe even clones. I begin to ponder this theory more fully when I hear the grating of metal on metal. Someone's coming in. I hear the sound of three sets of footsteps, followed by silence.

"Leave us," a voice reverberates off the walls. Footsteps, then the door grinds closed, leaving the two of us alone in the dark. The voice is synthesized. Maybe an artificial being, or someone trying to disguise themselves. I'm going with the latter. The way the person moves has human characteristics, probably female judging by the clicking sound of heels. I can feel her presence close to me now, probably standing within a few feet. "What is your business in Madripoor?" she asks me gravely.

"I'm looking for two men engaged in illegal activities." Metallic laughter fills the room.

"That describes most of the men in this city. Perhaps you can be more...specific?"

She takes a step towards me, waiting for my answer. I can hear her breathing within my reach. It may be my only chance to take control of this situation. I spring forward only to feel the chains tighten with a mind of their own, as I am dragged back to the floor. She doesn't even flinch. "My, my, how savage of you," she jests. "We call it 'Living Titanium'. One of our more clever innovations."

"Well, a guy's got to try," I answer sarcastically.

"Hmm. Well, then maybe you could try again," she says with patience, "What are you doing here? And please be more specific this time."

"I don't see how giving you information is going to help me. Who are you?" I listen to her sigh and begin to pace the room.

"You are a man, my dear Captain, are you not?" I choose not to respond, knowing what probably comes next. "You need food to eat, water to drink and air to breath." She pauses a moment to give her words some weight. "I can take all of those away. You might live longer than most, but you will not live long."

"And you need this information for..." I ask, prying.

"I don't think that's your concern," she snaps, "We are governed by our own set of laws here in Madripoor...perhaps I can give you the assurance that these 'men' you refer to will be apprehended."

I try my hardest not to laugh. "If you're the equivalent of the local law, then I think I'll take my chances out on the street."

"I am giving you one last chance to leave," she offers, "and I am not known for being generous."

"Since I doubt it's as generous as your last gift, I am afraid I'll have to decline. And before you do me any more favors, let me warn you that my friends know where I am, and will come for me if I do not contact them within a few hours." A pause followed, and I could almost feel the smile stretching across her face.

"Strangely enough, I'm not frightened by your threats," she answers coldly, "or your friends. Goodbye."

Sitting alone in a cell gives you plenty of time to think. Truth is, the Avengers have no idea where I am. They could home in on the Quinjet, but their chances of finding me in this city are slim, since my utility belt contained my personal homing device. Besides, the night's still young, and I've gotten myself out of worse before. But I'll have to do it alone. It's been a few hours since my mystery villain left. Maybe she's going to make good on her word, but I don't think so. Why would a stranger have an interest in letting me leave here alive, much less proposing to do my work for me? Either I fit into someone's agenda, or she's no stranger.

I wake from a light sleep to the familiar rasping of my prison door opening. I hear identical sets of feet on the metal floor. The woman is not with them this time. A light filtering in from the outside confirms that my twin assailants are coming towards me. I let them free my chains from the floor as they fasten my arms behind me, deciding my chances of escape will increase outside of my cell. I squint in the artificial light, as I am led down a long sterile hallway. My guards are identical in every way. "So, are you both called, 'Chang'?" Neither one answers as they lead me to a pair of heavy doors, and hold them open as I walk through. "Where are you taking me?" I give up when they ignore me again. Instead, I observe my surroundings, noting that the new hallway looks just like the last.

Finally, we turn down the hallway and the walls begin changing to old stone. Dripping comes from above, and I see droplets of water seeping down the cracks and onto the floor forming trails of algae. We may be underground, I note to myself. The hallway darkens and ends in stairs and we walk up as torches flicker on either side of me. The drones again hold open a pair of heavy wooden doors as I walk through into another chamber. The decor inside is very old world. Lavish tapestries hang from the ancient stone walls and high beams, and I look up to note rows of small stained glass windows twenty feet above. Heavy wooden furniture abounds, as well as candelabras, and the floor is covered in expensive Persian rugs. We turn down another hallway lined with display cases filled with delicate antiquities and treasures from all over the world. Whoever lives here is quite the collector - it rivals a museum. I am lost in admiration as I'm led through another chamber and suddenly flung to the hard, cold floor. I try to stand and am knocked to my knees again.

"Do not rise until the master gives you permission!" a voice angrily commands. I recognize it as one of the Changs.

"He may look up. Remember, he is our guest," the voice speaks as smooth as a snake.

I look up, and then slowly rise to stand before him. Sitting on an elaborate throne of gold and jade, he eyes me with amusement, wearing a kimono almost as rich as his dais, and a sinister grin. He rises from his chair and claps his gold adorned hands as several geishas appear bearing trays of food. I look on and note the rows of Changs lining the walls of the chamber. The geishas also look identical, with the exception of the intricate and unique kimonos each is wearing.

"Are they not exquisite, Captain? I may call you that, of course."

"You can call me whatever you want," I say with distaste, "It won't make a difference."

"Ah, such western bravado. But here I have the best of both worlds, Captain." He moves gracefully towards another door, "Come, join us for dinner."

The women disappear into an adjoining room, and he motions for me to follow.

"I'd rather not," I say sternly.

His handsome face twists slightly, "There is no need to make a scene. You should enjoy this meal, it will be your last."

With my hands bound before me, I take a seat at the long table at the center of the room. The other guests appear to be killers, thieves, merchants, politicians and any other unsavory character you can think of. The Changs sit me down next to a fat man stuffed into a very small Armani suit, who finds my presence there very amusing, and starts to bellow with laughter. The host sits at the head of the table and regards some of the other guests while I simply sit there, with my hands bound behind me, staring at the wall, as the fat man continues to chuckle. My host suddenly slams his fist on the table creating silence, and the fat man's face, if you can believe it, turns redder.

"Show some respect, you fat pig, or I'll kill you myself."

A tall thin man from near the head of the table breaks the lengthy silence, "Will we unmask him, Naito?"

Naito. My Japanese is rusty, but I think it means "night". It doesn't ring a bell, probably some sort of code name.

"I think not, Mr. Oshabi. I have no interest. We must give a man his dignity before he dies, no?"

I turn and look at him fearlessly, and note the evil grins playing on the faces around me. Naito stares back at me with unabashed fascination. I must be quite the treat for a man who surrounds himself with cowards. Then his fixation on me is broken as a stunning woman enters the dining hall, and all heads turn as she makes her way from one end to the empty seat next to Naito. She is dressed like a

geisha, but her kimono is far more elaborate, as are her hair and ornamentation. Despite her traditional dress it is impossible to hide that fact that she is of European descent. I find myself suddenly wondering if she was my mystery villain from the dark cell. Naito stands and offers her the empty chair. Before she sits, he spins her around and allows me to look at her directly.

"Captain America, this is Dei."

Naito and Dei, 'Night and Day'. Ugh. Cute.

In her eyes I see the same blank, cold expression that I myself had earlier. She's not making eye contact with me. As he turns her back towards him, he kisses her briefly, and she takes her seat next to him at the table.

Dinner is brought out in several courses, with all sorts of ridiculous, exotic foods. Naito has a geisha sit next to me and feed me with her hands, since mine are tied behind my back. Finally wine is served, and Naito, stands and proposes a toast.

"To our good friend the Captain, may he make us all invincible."

All of the ruffians cheer loudly and toast each other. Then Naito gives a signal for silence. "You may wonder why I have brought you here, Captain. Why I lured you, then captured you, and now will kill you..." I can feel all their eyes on me; all except for hers. "I have perfected the cloning process, Captain." He extends his hand again as all of the clones take a simultaneous step forward. "I'm sure you're familiar with it. I picked up the technology from your old nemesis, the Red Skull." Our eyes meet briefly, and I see his shared hatred in them. "Johann and I had a rather unfortunate parting of the ways, but look around you. All the 'Changs' and 'Leis' are flawless replicas of an original. You were once called the perfect soldier," he now stood and made his way around the table to me, "But now, you really will be the perfect soldier."

"A mindless slave is not perfection, Naito, I think you'd know better," I snarl.

He places his hand on my shoulder and leans down, "I replicate your mind, sir, not just your body." Clapping me on the shoulder, he turns and heads back to the table, booming, "When I said I had perfected the cloning process, I meant it."

It was now or never. As Naito turns his back on me, I take the opportunity to jump out of my seat and onto the table, as roughly a dozen Changs make a mad dash to cover the exits.

"Do not let him leave!" Naito yells, spinning about.

"You will not get away with this, Naito, and I *will* stop you."

"You insult me Captain! Here I am ready to immortalize you! Don't worry, you are but the first! I have plans for all of your friends!" Laughter fills the room as Naito resumes his seat.

"Your sick plan will fail, Naito. Even if I don't stop you, my

friends will."

I tuck and roll off the edge of the table positioning my hands from behind my back to in front of me and using my shackles, slam the nearest attacker into the wall. Running for the exit, each of his cohorts tries to stop me, coming at me with knives, guns and other weapons. The fat man wraps a whip around my legs and drags me to the ground, as another two pounce on me and hold me down. I throw one off and then the other, and use my feet to drag the fat man to the ground and flatten his face with my boots, sending him flying into the table. All the while I can see the glee in Naito's face from the corner of my eye. I get back to my feet, and head again towards the door throwing off henchmen, when a shot rings out, and I wince as cold metal shoots through my leg. I turn to see a Chang spray red powder again in my face, and the world starts to spin.

Looking up I see Naito's face contort in a blinding rage, as he draws a sword from his kimono, with the brilliant head of a golden dragon. I fall to my knees as the potion takes over and watch Naito slowly advance, gleaming blade in hand. As I desperately fight unconsciousness, I see the gun fall from Mr. Oshabi's hand, as his head soon meets it on the floor.

I awake with my mind still cloudy, and lay motionless for a moment trying to clear it. Chained again to the cold hard floor, I feel my leg and notice it had been neatly dressed. Standing makes a sharp pain shoot through my thigh, but I'm going to live. And I know much more than I did before. I tug at the chains once, just for kicks, then ease back down. It seems the unlucky Mr. Oshabi has actually bought me some time. I doubt he'll try the cloning process on me with an open wound - Naito's after perfection. I have to find a way to stop his operation in its tracks. My thoughts are interrupted by the door.

The corridor outside is dark, and I hear a pair of footsteps as the entrance closes behind them. I sit silently, and she doesn't speak at all, but the lingering perfume gives her away - the woman from earlier this evening. With a jingle, she reaches down and unlocks one cuff then drops the keys and hurries for the door. I waste no time jumping forward and grabbing her arm, though my legs are still in chains, and drag her back towards me. Trying to jerk out of my grasp, she gives up and comes at me with one of her legs, kicking me dead on in the chest and knocking me backwards.

Stunned, I reach for her retreating legs and pull one of them out from under her, making her hit the floor. Finding the keys on the ground I shove them into her hands, "Unlock my legs."

The synthesized voice whispers angrily, "Fool, let go of me! You'll get us both killed!" I find the synthesizer device and rip it from her collar.

"Let's try this again!" I order.

She stubbornly refuses to speak, and I throw the device to the ground and lean over her. "Unlock my legs. Now."

She understands my tone, because a furious clinking ensues, and then I'm free. I jerk her to her feet. "Who are you, and why are you helping me?" I say with a vice-like grip on her arm. I feel fear

radiating from her. "Let's get a few things straight here," I say softening my tone, "I need to know why you're helping me. Are you in danger?" I loosen my grip a little, and she starts laughing. "I don't see what's funny about this," I say, slightly annoyed.

She takes the opportunity to kick my wounded leg out from under me. I cry out in pain as she twists out of my grip and runs for the door, pounding on it as though to make it open faster. As I reach it I see her slip through the crack and take off down the darkened hall.

I push the door open the rest of the way, and hear the creak of the opening mechanism as it snaps. Well, at least all the Changs seem to be put to bed for the night. I follow the pathway I had walked earlier up to the main house. I make my way past the dining hall, where several guests were either passed out, or dead for all I know, freezing in my tracks at the corner when I hear voices. It's Naito and Dei, who seemed to be arguing. I look straight across the hall into what appeared to be a woman's bedroom, and carefully check before silently dashing across. The voices go on, and I take the opportunity to do some detective work. It's Dei's room, all right. A picture of her and Naito together in a garden confirms it, but the heavy geisha makeup is hiding her identity. An impressive array of weapons are displayed in cabinets all around the room, and I grab a few and tuck them into my waistline. A heavy and ornate wardrobe stands alone against a wall, and I open it only to find more kimonos neatly folded as well as a few other formal dresses. The voices get louder and I stalk into the open bathroom, concealing myself in one of the large, darkened cabinets.

"Go to bed," I hear Naito say roughly, "We will discuss this in the morning." The thud of a body slams against the wall. "Don't forget that I can make a million of you, witch."

Naito's footsteps echo his anger as he storms down the hall. I hear the door shut and a sigh as Dei enters. I reach into my waistband, and draw out one of the weapons as I hear her throw various items around the room. I look down into my palm and realization dawns on me as the diamond shape glistens in my hand.

"Hello, Rachel," I say angrily as I step out of the cabinet, tossing the throwing diamond to her in the bath. A look of rage passes over her face, as she deftly catches the diamond. Grabbing a towel, she rises, wrapping it around her. I take the opportunity to get a better look at her. It's the same lithe frame I remember, but something is different. How long has it been? Her hair is jet black, and cascades down her white shoulders. I almost don't recognize her...but her eyes. The same brilliant green.

"Are you done?" she asks bitterly, shaking me out of my trance. "Captain America, reduced to a peeping tom. That's low even for you," she says dripping sarcasm.

"I see you've gone back to your criminal ways," I add defensively, "and to think I was worried about you."

She stares me down, regarding me coldly, "You don't know anything." She turns and walks out into the room, and I follow on her heels. She resumes shuffling through her drawers and ignoring me.

"Dammit, Rachel!" I yell at her, "Look at me!"

She slowly turns around with a mixture of fear and amusement. "Did you just curse?"

"Explain to me what's going on here!" I say moving toward her, angry that she finds my choice of words entertaining.

"And to think what I would've given," she said laughing, "to get you to scream my name..."

I grab her and pull her to me, hugging her desperately against my chest, and as she fights me, her laughter slowly gives way to sobs. "I thought I'd never see you again," she sighed.

She holds me tightly, and I tilt her chin up to look into her eyes, wiping away a stray tear. The warmth of her body melts into mine, and I can't find any words, as a flood of familiar sensations return. My lips burn as they lightly touch hers...and she turns away from me. Her face wears an unfeeling mask.

"I prayed I'd never see you again." She paused for a instant. "You'd better leave. Naito could be here any moment."

She slips behind her wardrobe and puts on a robe, as I stand there speechless.

"Are you crazy?" I ask her maddeningly, "Do you think I'm going to let his project continue, much less let you stay here?"

"I don't need you to save me. Leave." Looking out the window, she opens the wide panes and stands aside. "Go. Now." I refuse, shaking my head. We turn hearing movement in the hallway. "Please," she says urgently.

"What aren't you telling me?" I ask her moving over to the window.

"If you don't go now, I'll go get Naito myself."

"Does he *own* you?" I ask, raising my voice in anger again. I grab her as she tries to turn away again, "Then what is it?" I ask stonily. "Why can't you leave?!!"

"...Because I'm his wife."

A strong breeze blows in from the window, bringing in the odor of the ocean. "What?" I ask in disbelief. "Why?"

Her arms cross in front of her and she takes another step away from me. "What do you want me to say?"

"Well, we can't discuss this right now. Let's go." I grab her wrist, drawing her towards the window.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that!" I stiffen at the sound of Naito's voice. I turn behind me to see the door swing open, as he stands triumphantly in the doorway with his soldiers.

"You don't have a choice!" I yell back at him, guiding Rachel towards the window.

"I have a gun leveled at her head, Captain. If you leave, she dies."

"You'd shoot your own wife in cold blood?" I ask bitterly. He walks towards me, eyes never leaving mine and pulls her out of my arms, handing her over to the Changs. His gun is still aimed at her head.

"Yes," he hisses back at me. "Now let's take a walk back to your cell, Captain."

I back up to the window, and over my shoulder I see the drop is about 80 feet, straight into ocean. "I don't think so, Naito," I call his bluff. "If she dies, so do your chances of ever seeing me again."

Naito considers this for a moment then tucks the revolver into the belt of his bathrobe. "I have another proposal, then. Your freedom, for hers." I perch myself on the window ledge ready to jump at any minute. "By the time you return with your friends, Captain, all of this will be gone," he says with a wave of his hand, "...and she will be dead." I can feel the strong breeze pushing against my back, urging my escape. "You're running out of time, Captain." I step down from the ledge in answer.

"You have yet to prove to me you're a man of your word."

Rachel twists in the Changs' grip, "No, don't do this...it doesn't matter..."

"Silence!" Naito yells. "Gather our guests," he orders a Chang. "It's time we reward the Captain's tenacity."

My hands are bound again behind my back, but this time with rope. Naito is not expecting me to resist. We follow him back down the corridor, to the lower chambers, and past the area I recognize as my holding cell. The hall suddenly expands into a massive chamber, filled with a dim green light. As we enter, I see the walls of the circular chamber lined with sarcophagi filled with featureless human forms. Pipes attached to the containers seem to be pumping in some sort of organic liquid, slowly filling them. At the center of the room, as massive control panel reaches in a column up to the ceiling, surrounded by a winding staircase with men and women working steadily over the equipment. Several scientists approach me, and begin poking and prodding me with needles, taking blood and tissue samples, and injecting various substances into me. I eye Naito chatting with a scientist, and watch as he leaves the chamber. The column in the center has two imbedded sarcophagi that stand adjacent to each other, and I watch as the assistants make adjustments to the one on the left. The one on the right is loaded with the same strange shapeless form as those lining the walls, but it appears to be made of a different substance. Holding a gleaming needle, a man in a containment suit approaches me and jabs it into my arm. Several more rush towards me with a gurney, and realize that I'm about to lose consciousness for the second time today.

My eyes take a moment to adjust to the change in atmosphere. I can see clearly through the thick liquid surrounding me, though it casts a green tone on everything. My nose and mouth are covered with a

breathing apparatus, and tubes run from my arms and legs through the top of the chamber. Outside I can see quite a crowd assembled to watch the festivities, and feel some measure of gratitude that Naito decided to leave me with some clothing. Unfortunately, my hearing is impaired, preventing me from taking part in what I'm sure is an eloquent speech that Naito is giving to the surly crowd before him. He is dressed in a western-style business suit, as are most of the others, some are new faces, others are not. Maybe his investors. I find myself wondering haphazardly what will happen if I do not get myself out of this. But my mind snaps to quick attention as I see Rachel brought into the room, seeming much like her old feisty self, and it gives me hope. Then she sees me, and pain shoots through me when I see the look in her eyes. The Changs appear dressed in waiter attire with trays of champagne and mill through the small crowd dispensing glasses. After a few long minutes, they're done, and I see them line up in rows at Naito's command. In the flash of a moment, I see my future in them, and it sickens me. At his command, a scientist approaches the panel and crosses beyond my vision.

And then I feel the greatest physical pain I have ever felt in my life.

It is as though every cell of my body is turned inside out, one by one. I can almost hear the ripping and pulling in my head, as I clench my teeth in agony. When it is over, I give in and let the weightless atmosphere carry me. A roaring sound fills my ears, as the liquid begins to drain from beneath me, though I am still suspended in midair, and my hearing returns. No one is watching me though. They're all agape at what's next to me. I look to my right, and see myself staring back.

"Isn't he wonderful, Ladies and Gentlemen?" Naito is beyond pleased with himself. Assistants scurry about both of us, stabilizing and then comparing our life signs.

"A complete success," the head scientist says to him, "Identical in every aspect."

"What about brain patterns?" He asks, keeping the audience in suspense.

"Synapse for synapse."

Naito throws his hands in the air theatrically as the crowd thunders applause. "What do you think, my Dei?" The Changs drag her before him, and he attempts to take her hand gracefully.

"You're a monster," she says, snatching her hand back.

"I believe a demonstration is in order," he smiles cruelly at her, barely hiding his ire. By this time, my doppelganger and I are both fully costumed and waiting. "And what do you think?" he questions me.

"I think you have a promise to keep," I answer, looking briefly over at Rachel. In anger, he shoves her roughly to the floor, "I said I am a man of my word, sir." Everyone is so engrossed in watching this confrontation, that the flickering reaction registering on the clone goes unnoticed.

"You still live," Neito continued, "And until you are dead, our agreement can be rewritten. Destroy him," he commands stepping back into the crowd.

The clone moves towards me with a familiar grace. I begin to doubt myself: I'm still weak from the cloning process. I notice my doppelganger has none of my disabilities. He moves toward me with lightning speed and it takes all of my focus to twist and fall out of his reach. I see a gleaming tray of medical instruments, and grab a scalpel, imbedding it in his leg in the same area I was wounded by the bullet. A look of confusion passes over his face, and he stumbles in his first sensation of pain. He looks towards Naito for an explanation, and when he receives none, resumes his advance on me. I block several punches with my fists, deflecting moves I have used time and time again. In the end, I know this will come down to a battle of endurance, unless he can be reasoned with. But I'm slow, and it costs me, as the clone returns the favor by landing a blow to my injured leg, and I collapse in pain. Then he is on me, and grabbing me by the throat, hoists me above him, holding me aloft. He easily has twice my strength, and I feel his fingers digging into my windpipe. Looks like I've lost this round.

The crowd is cheering, and it's clear they want blood.

"He is an exact replica, but with several improvements," Naito narrates. "He has twice the physical strength, but no will power of his own."

Laughter begins to scatter as I struggle to free myself and my breathing becomes labored. I guess I'd better play my trump card. I look down into my counterpart's eyes as best I can. "You can kill me," I rasp, "but it will never destroy her hatred for you." I get no reaction. Darkness begins to scatter across my vision. "Natio will kill her, too."

He doesn't respond at first, but then the flutter reappears, just like before. He tightens his hold on me. God, I think my head might explode. "Stop Naito, and end her slavery and yours!"

His eyes avert to Rachel, crouched tense on the ground. He drops me to the floor and I try to catch my breath, looking up when I hear the sound of the sarcophagi on the walls fill with fluid. I watch the duplicate stalk toward the crowd and it parts as people scream and flee in all directions.

"What are you doing?" Naito cries. "Stop, I order you!" I hear a snap, as an unfortunate guest falls victim to my doppelganger. Then Rachel is at my side.

"He's trying to make more clones!" she says staring at the walls around her. "I'll stop the process. You go after Naito."

I rise and notice that the Changs have not fled with the rest of the guests. She presses me onward, "Don't worry about the Changs, I can take care of them."

"It's not you I'm worried about," I add.

She runs to a console and begins working. At the touch of a button, a panel flips open, and she removes what look like dartguns. "Use this

on them," she tells me as she loads the cartridges filled with a bluish fluid. "You only have ten shots, so be careful."

I leave her, and head after Neito, dodging the Changs and managing to take out a couple with the darts, watching them melt into a greenish heap on the floor. Maneuvering over the remainder, I glance at Rachel one last time before heading down the hall. I make short work of several of the surly crowd that had gathered earlier, dodging as machine gun bullets whiz past my ears. I jam my elbow into a mad attacker's face, knocking him out cold, and loosening a gold-capped tooth in the process. The three left standing decide their chances are better on the streets, and flee. As I near the doorway, Leis appear, crying out simultaneously and charging me. Taking a defensive stance, I'm battered all over before I can put some space between us. I destroy two nearest to me with the darts. The six remaining decide to take a more tactical approach and start circling me. They're fast all right, but I'm faster.

I plug them one by one, dodging their attacks, and trying not to slip in the sludge building on the floor. Tossing the gun aside, I hear a screaming come from the foyer beyond. I turn the corner to see my clone's all too familiar grip around Naito's aristocratic neck.

"It's over, Naito," slowly approaching, I place my hand on the clone's arm. "It's over." His eyes narrow as Naito turns another shade of purple. "She's safe. In the laboratory."

Our face off is broken by an explosion that rocks the compound. The building sways, giving me the inclination that in a few moments we'll all be in the ocean. Naito passes out in the clone's grip, and he lets him slip to the floor. A series of smaller burst follow and Rachel comes running into the foyer,

"We have to get out of here, now. The compound will be destroyed."

I pick up Naito's lifeless body and throw him over my shoulder, "Let's get the others."

"We don't have time..."

"Then we'll have to make time!" I yell back.

We head into the hall, and find it deserted.

"This way," Rachel calls, beckoning back down into the catacombs below, as my clone follows slowly behind.

Back down the twisting halls we run, as the ceiling starts to give way, and I can feel the heat as the fire raging above as it makes its way towards us. A hidden door opens at Rachel's touch, into another chamber with a narrow bridge leading over a gully. I make my way over as quickly as possible, balancing the weight of the burden on my back. Naito's no longer lifeless, and the stinging in my brain forces me to drop him to the ground.

"You think you could best me?" he screams, looming over me. I see the source of my pain, a golden ring on his bent knuckle. "I gift from my father," he chuckles, staring down at his own hand.

"You're insane," Rachel yells, "We'll all be destroyed!" I can see the fire trying to push its way through the door behind him.

"It doesn't matter anymore." He stands proudly over me, and the clone takes a step forward, blocking his path to Rachel. "You think I want her, still? Tell him what you are, my love!" he spits.

I ignore his words and get to my feet. "Get her out of here," I order the clone. He nods at me slowly then hoists a screaming Rachel over his shoulders, leaving me to face Naito alone.

I feel the energy from the ring rip a burning hole through my costume, just grazing my shoulder. My reaction is to charge him head on and slam him to the floor. A few punches miss their target, as Naito maneuvers with more agility than I would've guessed. But I'm not about to misjudge my opponent a second time, and I retreat, giving him a chance to face me again head on. This time he charges me, and lands a few judo moves of his own. I leap forward and duck as he jumps at me, and missing his target allows me to land an elbow hard in his back. He stumbles forward, and reaches for the railing, as the door blows open, and a rush of searing heat explodes into the chamber. As he turns to face me, I look at his scorched face, and burning clothing.

"You haven't won yet, Captain!"

He raises his hand, directing the energy from the ring at me, when he lets out a scream. His arm is vaporized right in front of his eyes as the damaged ring explodes. The force throws him over the ledge, and he barely manages to grasp a hold with his remaining arm. I cover my head with my arms as the fire rages around us, and find Naito's dangling body.

"I'm going to pull you over," I yell to him. The fire around us is nearly unbearable, if I don't get us out of here soon, we'll both be cooked.

"Like I said, Captain, you haven't won yet." His demented face widens in a grin, then he lets go, his laughter echoing off the chamber, and then he's gone.

I don't waste any time running through the door, as an explosion rocks behind me, and the flames chase my heels down the hall. With a running leap I shatter the stained glass window in front of me, falling 30 feet into the ocean below.

I take a hard gulp of air when I reach the surface, and though the waves around me are rough, they do most of the work of carrying me back to shore. I smack against a jutting rock, and try to get a hold when I feel a strong grip on my shoulder as I'm lifted out of the water in one smooth movement. Eye to eye once again, my clone braves what I guess would pass for a smile, as he sets me on the ground. I lay back on the sand behind me, and close my eyes for a moment. When I look up, I see Rachel standing over me.

"Where's Naito?" she asks sharply.

"Dead. Or maybe not. I'm not sure."

Another blast shakes the ground, and I crane my neck to watch the hillside collapse, taking the castle with it into the ocean.

"He's not dead. I can assure you," she says tossing my shield onto the ground before me. "We found it in one of the rooms on our way out, as well as this," she flings my utility belt towards me, and I slip it on.

"What about him?" I ask, looking over at the clone, who's intent on a small creature he's dug out of the surf.

"He has a lot to learn before he can fit into your world." He sees us gazing over at him, and his strange smile reappears, though I doubt it has anything to do with me.

"And what about you? Where do you fit in my world?"

She takes a moment to compose her thoughts, "I don't fit. I'm sure you must realize by now that I'm a clone."

The thought weighs heavily on me, and I sit up to meet her gaze. "I suspected as much, but I wasn't...", I sigh. "It makes sense taking into account the differences in your appearance."

Standing, I brush the sand off, and look out over the water, unsure I want to know the answer to what I'm about to ask next. "Is she dead?" I ask, turning back towards her, squinting in the bright sunlight.

"No," she replies, reaching into her jacket, and pulling out a disk, hands it to me. "This is all of her DNA information. I don't know if it will help, but I thought you should have it in any case," her hand lingers on mine briefly. "That's all I know."

"Thanks," I say, tucking it into my belt. I turn away from her to take inventory, and locating my homing device, flip it on. "Well, my ride should be here any moment...I" Turning back, I find both of them gone. A quick scan of the landscape reveals nothing but the sound of the tide and the wind through the distant trees. I know when the Quinjet arrives, I'll run another pass, but I doubt I'll find anything. I can only hope that if we run into each other again, it will be under friendlier circumstances.

A few days have passed, and I'm back at home carrying on my routine as though nothing happened. Sitting down in my private office, I begin the task of recording the past days events in my personal log.

'I've filed my report, which I'm sure the other Avengers have read, but no one has breached the subject with me. Gambling on my clone "sharing" my feelings was risky, but luckily Naito knew nothing of my past relationship with his "wife". My feelings for Rachel are much stronger than I thought, I guess. I've come to terms with the fact that there is another version of me running around out there; it's not the first time, probably won't be the last. It could cause complications later, but I guess I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. What nags me are the whereabouts of Rachel. She must have gotten herself in deep to run into a character like Naito, but then again, that woman's a trouble magnet. I'm having Dr. Pym run the DNA information on the CD through some tests, to see if anything comes

up, but I doubt it'll provide any clues to her whereabouts. I can only begin searching in the vicinity...'

I'm interrupted by the intercom buzzing on the wall. The screen is filled with the image of Dr. Pym busy in his laboratory. "Hey, Henry, what's the story?" He finishes some last minute adjustments, and then leans into the screen.

"Well, the CD turned up nothing but DNA, which is what you guessed it would," he says looking over a computer monitor. "But get this." He punches up another screen with a DNA model twisting, as readouts continue on the monitor. "There are traces of *your* Super Soldier Serum still in her bloodstream. It appears that despite the transfusion process, it has somehow bonded to her DNA." I lean forward in interest, looking over the readout monitor more carefully. "The Super Soldier Serum, though transforming your cellular structure, was never a part of your DNA. Something strange is going on here."

I sit back and cross my arms, trying to comprehend what he has just told me. "What does this mean, Henry?"

"Well, something in her genes acted as a catalyst for the bonding process," he says, tapping a key on the console. A single revolving strand is highlighted then separated from the rest, twisting in the bluish light. "It's the X-Factor, Cap. Your friend Rachel is a mutant."

To Be Continued...

End
file.